

# **'Joining the academic life': South African students who succeed at university despite not meeting standard entry requirements**

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## **Abstract**

At present the Swedish points system is one of the main determinants of an applicant either being granted or refused entry into many South African higher education institutions (HEIs). Using a grounded theory approach, this article interprets the experiences of participants whose school performance and therefore university 'entry points' were lower than the expected norm. Despite not meeting standard university entry requirements, these students succeeded at university, completing their degrees in the minimum time available and going on to higher degrees. The journey of these participants – from low entry points to academic success – suggests that points based on school performance are not necessarily the best way of identifying students' potential to succeed in the contemporary South African educational context. If their entry points were not a good indication of their ability to thrive at university, the article asks, what is it about these participants that accounts for their success? And what implications does this have for South African practice, not only with regard to admissions policies but also in relation to the responsibilities of HEIs to students once they are admitted?

**Keywords:** academic performance, identity, grounded theory, student success, low entry points, South Africa

## **INTRODUCTION**

This article employs grounded theory methods to analyse students' accounts of their success at university. Research into academic performance has traditionally identified prior performance as a central criterion for predicting students' academic performance at university (Astin 1999; Bowden and Marton 1998; Burton and Dowling 2005; Entwistle and Wilson 1977; Dayioglu and Turut-Asik 2007; Jonassen and Grabowski 1993; Pustjens, Van de Gaer, Van Damme and Onghena 2004). Recent studies have, however, argued that prior academic achievement is not necessarily the most significant predictor of academic success. Lizzo, Wilson and Simons (2002) argue that students' perception of their learning environment

is a stronger predictor of academic performance than prior performance. There are individual, economic, social and cultural factors that affect academic performance. Studies have shown that self-concept enables students to manage the environment and cope with difficult situations at university, thus affecting their performance (Burton and Dowling 2005; Drew and Watkins 1998; Entwistle and Ramsden 1982; Zajacova, Lynch and Espenshade 2005). This research argues that students' prior performance is not necessarily an important determinant of academic performance, contrary to existing discourse. The aim of the present study was to discover how students who were admitted to an elite South African university with low Swedish points account for their success at university.

Much of the extant literature on predictors of academic performance focuses on the factors that determine the academic achievement of students who do meet university entry requirements, as well as on those who either do not gain access or fail to succeed at university. The current study differed in that it focused on students who were admitted to the university with low points, that is, those students who did not meet university entry requirements but ended up being successful at university. The required entry points needed for admission to the university where the study was conducted is 35 points; therefore, students with 32 points or less were considered as students with low entry points. 'Success' was taken to mean the ability to pass subjects and to complete their academic programmes within the minimum allocated time period.

In many parts of South Africa, learners encounter educational dysfunction (Dryden-Peterson and Sieborger 2006; Pym and Kapp 2011; Sampson 2011). This means that school achievement is often a poor indicator of learners' potential to succeed at university. Even in contexts where an individual is part of a functioning school system, there may be an array of personal and contextual factors that explain poor school performance and which lead to school performance being a poor predictor of later academic potential. But what can be said about individuals whose success at university seems on the face of it to be surprising, given their prior performance? Is there anything that this rather special group, who at first glance seem to share nothing other than surprising success given their poor entry points, have in common? As Burton and Dowling (2005) argue, by 'identifying those factors and understanding them, we are placed in a better position to make interventions aimed at promoting success for those who manage to gain access into the university', and it might be added, to develop instruments that might help to predict the potential for success among those who would not normally gain access to university given their poor school results.

## THE STUDY

The study was based on in-depth interviews with 33 participants. Of these 22 were face-to-face interviews, while 11 interviews were conducted electronically. The participants were graduates of an elite South African university. All were drawn from

the Faculty of Humanities and were admitted into the university with low points but were classified ‘successful’ according to the study criteria. Nineteen participants were admitted to a four-year (Foundation) Arts degree programme instead of the usual three-year programme. The remainder were admitted with low Swedish points but were permitted to enter the (regular) three-year academic programme. Foundation programmes afford students from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to gain access to tertiary education. They are a response to the national imperative to increase access for black students, generate new curricula and flexible models of learning (Higher Education Quality Committee 2006). The programme at the research site provides counselling and mentoring to students to equip them with skills such as coping with the academic environment, language abilities and computer skills which are deemed important for academic success (Rhodes University 2011, 14). The programme for the Faculty of Humanities, which was the focus of the study, admits students based on a variety of factors including: ‘race’, socio-economic background, school and family history (Rhodes University 2009).

While a minimum of 35 points is usually required for entry into the Faculty of Humanities, it is possible to be admitted into the extended programme with as few as 25 Swedish points provided at least a D is obtained for English second language. An alternative admission test is administered by the university and those students who obtain at least 40–49 per cent on the Alternative Admission (AARP) test can also gain admission regardless of their Swedish points. The participants in the present study entered university with points ranging from 15 to 32 (see Table 1). The socio-economic status of some of the participants was that of abject poverty and few tertiary-educated role models. As one commented, ‘as a youngster my role models included tractor-drivers and other farm workers’. Yet, a significant number in the study group possessed high level goals and aspirations. Several expressed a belief in a higher power guiding their lives. Almost all were highly motivated by the need to improve not only their own circumstances but to elevate their families from their present circumstances (see Dass-Brailsford 2005).

Table 1: participants’ Swedish points

Points	No. of participants in the study
15	1
19	1
23	1
24	2
26	3
27	4
28	3
29	2
30	4

31	4
32	7
Total	33

Operating within an interpretive frame the aim of the study was to gain access to the participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Lincoln and Denzin 2000, 191; Neuman 2011, 102). In-depth, open-ended interviews were used as a means of gaining access to the participants' self-perception of their success at university. Grounded theory methods were used to analyse the collected data, with open, focused and theoretical coding of the data employed to discover theories relating to academic performance.

Grounded theory can be described simply as deriving or constructing theories from data or theories grounded in the data (Charmaz 2006, 4). In grounded theory research, various steps are followed, including gathering rich data, coding, writing memos and theoretical sampling until the point of saturation is reached. Coding typically involves two main steps, namely: initial coding, followed by focused coding. The initial coding can be done line by line, word by word or incident by incident; while focused coding entails collecting those codes that reoccur in the initial coding. These forms of coding help the researcher to arrive at concepts collected from the data. After coding, a process of memo writing is embarked upon which forms the core of the research paper. The process is circular rather than linear, entailing a procedure of constant comparison between emerging sets of data. One of the major rules guiding grounded theory methods is allowing the data to speak for itself rather than forcing it into pre-conceived categories (Charmaz 2006; Stern and Porr 2011).

Participants were asked to describe their backgrounds and their experiences at university and to attempt to identify what, in their perception, enabled them to become successful students. After the initial and focused coding of the interview transcripts, axial coding was employed. Similar to theoretical coding, this process involves converting text into concepts, and conceptualising how codes relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory (Charmaz 2006, 61). The initial coding separates the data into different categories while the process of axial coding brings this data back together, by suggesting how the different categories might be linked (Charmaz 2006, 61). After focused coding, when comparing the different codes, it became apparent that the code identity (social and academic) was common to most of the data; it became apparent that the creation of new identities was a significant feature in all the participants' accounts of their journey from low entry points to academic success.

In the process of coding and constant comparison, gaps were revealed and new ideas emerged for further exploration in the interviews that followed. Ideas and interpretations of the data were recorded in the form of memos. Employing the method of constant comparison, the data was read for incidents that were repeated across different interviews. Subsequent collection of data yielded no interruption

of the common thread of 'identity' (social and academic), thus it became clear that a degree of theoretical saturation was being reached and the process of data collection ended.

## RESEARCH ON STUDENT SUCCESS: CURRENT DEBATES

Enquiry into the factors that account for student failure or success is not a new field; many scholars have done extensive research on the factors that predict students' academic performance (see, eg, Case 2007, 2008; Entwistle and Ramsden 1982; Jonassen and Grabowski 1993; Pritchard and Wilson 2003; Trapmann, Hell, Hirn and Schuler 2007). In these studies, prior performance or knowledge has traditionally been identified as a significant predictor of a student's subsequent academic performance (Burton and Dowling 2005, 26; Dayioglu and Turut-Asik 2007, 255, 264; Entwistle and Wilson 1977, 8; Eppler and Harju 1997, 566; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer and Elliot 2002, 570; Jonassen and Grabowski 1993, 32–33; Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle 1984, 69; Nettles 1991, 83; Trapmann et al 2007, 134). Prior performance encompasses those skills, experiences, ideas, abilities and general knowledge that a student brings to the learning environment. Individuals differ in the amount of prior knowledge they bring to the place of learning and the current research suggests that prior learning plays a significant role in predicting the academic outcomes of students at university (Boughey 2008, 194; Burton and Dowling 2005, 76; Jonassen and Grabowski 1993, 32–33). The consensus is that someone who has been well taught at school is likely to have little difficulty succeeding at university. Raaheim, Wankowski and Radford (1991), however, offer a new perspective on the effect of prior knowledge. They argue that most schools encourage dependence on teachers on the part of students and that the contrary is true of the university setting, where typically independence in study habits is encouraged (Raaheim et al 1991, 62). In this sense, prior learning can have a negative impact on a person's ability to do well at university where the context and expectations are very different to what is required to do well at school. Some secondary schools encourage habits of dependency in learners which gives them a false sense of academic competence and when they enter the university setting they realise that they have not been well prepared for university, which can be demoralising (Pym and Kapp 2011, 6; Raaheim et al 1991, 62).

Other research has shown that prior academic achievement is not necessarily the most significant predictor of academic success. Lizzo et al (2002) argue that students' perceptions of their learning environment are a stronger predictor of academic performance than prior performance. Jackson and Swan (1991, 135) argue that the student's background is not a strong predictor of academic performance but that self-confidence significantly affects academic outcomes. There are individual, economic, social and cultural factors that have been shown to predict academic performance. Motivation has been well described as a factor that affects performance (Entwistle and Wilson 1977; Jonassen and Grabowski 1974; Marton et al 1984) by determining

how hard someone will work, the study methods they will employ, the hours of study, and so forth. Motivation has been grouped into two types, namely: intrinsic motivation, which is a person's desire to succeed and which is often coupled with self-confidence and perceived success); and extrinsic motivation, which describes the degree to which a person is willing to seek external help (Entwistle and Wilson 1977; Jonassen and Grabowski 1947; Marton et al 1984).

Closely related to the question of motivation is the idea of goals. Goals can be seen as the standards set by a student in order to achieve specific outcomes (Hendrich and Schepers 2004; Entwistle and Ramsden 1982). Goal setting will affect the student's participation in academic activities, the approach to study that is adopted and the student's perception of the learning environment. Students who have an idea of where they are going and what they want to do in future (professional career) are more successful than those who do not have clear goals (Raaheim et al 1991, 17). Individual goals and commitments lead to increased motivation, drive and effort, and prove to be important determinants of success or failure (Biggs 1978, 275; Eppler and Harju 1997, 567, 569; Tinto 1993). Research also suggests that the learning environment and the student's perception of it play a major role in academic performance outcomes. According to Lizzo et al (2002), students' perceptions of their learning environment are a stronger predictor of academic performance than prior performance. Also, the students' perceptions affect their ability to adapt to the learning environment (Lourens and Smith 2003). The students' perceptions of their learning environment go hand in hand with the quality of experience the students have of university, especially in the first year of study and this affects their ability to succeed at university (Lourens and Smith 2003).

The effects of 'racial' characteristics on academic performance in contexts of discrimination have been extensively studied and are a major concern in the extant literature on the subject of access and success for previously disadvantaged groups at South African universities (Case and Marshall 2009; Dryden-Peterson and Sieborger 2006; Pym and Kapp 2011; Soudien 2009). The current research suggests that race has a major impact on academic performance. Students who find themselves in minority groups at university often experience difficulty in adjusting to a culturally different environment and those students who perceive the university environment as supportive rather than culturally alien will perform better than those who do not (Allen and Haniff 1991; Davis 2002; Flemming 1984; Monk 1998; Tinto 1993). This is a particularly germane feature of student success in contemporary South Africa. South African universities and the government in the post-apartheid era have put structures in place to address the inequality and disparity that is an ongoing legacy of apartheid (Pym and Kapp 2011, 2). However, as Nettles (1991, 82) argues, a 'racial gap' remains which needs to be closed if all students are to be availed of equal opportunities to succeed.

Gender has also been extensively studied as a factor affecting academic outcomes (Dayioglu and Turut-Asik 2007; Entwistle and Wilson 1977). Dayioglu and Turut-Asik (2007), for instance, look at the gendered socialisation of children and gendered



differences in the attitudes and expectations of teachers which in turn affect students' perceptions regarding their own abilities and potential. Jackson and Swan (1991, 139) looked at ways in which the institutional environment affects the academic performance of female students. South African universities continue to be male-dominated environments, particularly at the level of the professoriate and top administrative structures.

In contrast to the common perception that economic disadvantage is in itself correlated with poor academic outcomes, Dass-Brailsford (2005) studied academic achievement among black disadvantaged students. She found that the socio-economic status of disadvantaged students does not affect their academic aspirations and academic performance at university. Instead, she identified three major factors as affecting academic performance, namely: individual characteristics (goal, motivation, initiative and an understanding of the self as possessing a measure of agency); family support; and institutional support. Other research supports the finding that individual and personality characteristics affect academic outcomes. Individuals' personalities can be seen as those characteristics the individuals display that affect their interaction with their environment (Biggs 1978, 266; Entwistle and Ramsden 1982, 69; Entwistle and Wilson 1977, 146; Jonassen and Grabowski 1993, 5; Raaheim et al 1991, 79). Emotional stability, for instance, can affect academic performance, as can the student's perception of the locus of control with respect to where the student allocates responsibility for learning (Astin 1984, 528; Drew and Watkins 1998). There are two major types of locus of control, namely: internal and external. People who possess the internal control locus take responsibility for their own successes and failures, and see their successes and failures as of their own making; while those who possess the external locus of control do not take responsibility for their successes and failures (Drew and Watkins 1998; Jonassen and Grabowski 1993).

Students' self-concept/efficacy has also been critically discussed. Self-concept is a psychological construct that refers to the way an individual student views or rates himself/herself; views that an individual holds and uses to describe himself/herself (Burton and Dowling 2005; Drew and Watkins 1998; Entwistle and Ramsden 1982; Zajacova et al 2005). Individual's academic self-concept to a large extent affects their ability to learn and deal with learning situations. Self-concept is closely related to self-efficacy, which is people's belief in their ability to cope with stress and to be in a position to take control over their learning. To possess academic self-efficacy means people possess confidence in their ability to perform well (Burton and Dowling 2005; Zajacova et al 2005). Burton and Dowling (2005) noted that 'self-confidence empowers a student to manage their learning environment regardless of the course of study'. Eppler and Harju (1997, 517) advocated that teachers help their students determine their personal beliefs and encourage them to think of the effect these beliefs have on their performance.

Other studies have looked at the way in which the student is taught; the assessment methods that are used; and staff-student relationships as factors which affect learning

outcomes (Bowden and Marton 1998, 62; Dayioglu and Turut-Asik 2007, 272). For Bowden and Marton (1998, 62), these links between teaching behaviours and academic performance are often negative. A variety of studies suggest that the quality of teaching and the level of assistance provided by teaching staff will affect students' approach to study (Jackson and Swan 1991, 139; Lourens and Smith 2003).

An emerging body of literature has begun to emphasise the importance of individual identity and its role in the ability of students to engage successfully with the university context (Boughey 2008; Case and Marshal 2009; Pym and Kapp 2011; Soudien 2009). Boughey (2008) studied the ways in which identity plays a role in the students' ability to engage with the texts that are encountered at university. She offers an alternative perspective to the commonly held view that students' inappropriate approaches to learning and their lack of basic skills account for their inability to engage with the university context and be successful students. She argues that the students' learning ability will be affected by their 'identities as individuals outside the university and how they understand outside context' (Boughey 2008, 198). Pym and Kapp (2011, 11) also noted the importance of recognising that students will draw from their previous experiences in creating new subject positions when they enter university (Soudien 2009, 35).

## DISCUSSION

The present study found that the question of identity emerged as a significant feature of the participants' experience of becoming successful at university. The majority of the participants experienced themselves as outsiders entering the university with a profound sense of alienation from its dominant identity. Existing identity constructions, such as the motivation to study, cultural values, beliefs and school experiences, are confronted on entering the university, with new identities imposed by other students and sometimes lecturers. Their entrance into the university with low academic points, often from disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds, compounds their sense of an imposed negative identity in a milieu where the majority are economically, socially and educationally advantaged. In these particular accounts, the participants find ways of rejecting this imposed identity, and developing an academic identity for themselves as legitimately belonging in the academy, their alienation from its dominant culture notwithstanding.

### Negotiating a soiled identity

In his work on stigma, Goffman (1990) refers to the stigmatised person's complex relationship to those defined within any particular context as 'normals' – the ways in which the person in possession of a 'soiled' identity must daily negotiate the distances and congruencies between their self perception and the image that is reflected back to them by the perceptions of others. The students in the current study entered university with identities which were in most cases incongruent with the university's ideal typical student (Boughey 2008, 194). Entering university without



having met the usual entry requirements meant that the participants had to confront, often unexpectedly for them, an existing set of constructions of their identity on the part of those students in 'the mainstream' as it is commonly referred to. They frequently pointed out that other students saw them as 'stupid' as a result of their doing an extended degree programme and/or their low points along with other factors of language and class which marked them as 'other' in the predominantly English-speaking, middle class academic culture of the university:

We were put in a little corner here, we were outcasts, we were those less intelligent people (Lenka).

The thing with Extended Studies is that other students have the perception that we are not as smart as everyone else. But that is far from the truth (Tanashe).

They ask each other what are you doing, which year are you doing, you say you are doing first year and then they say which subjects and you say you are only doing two subjects and others are doing four, others five; they kind of view you in some ... they view you negatively, they come to think ... say you are less intelligent and all that stuff so *ja* that's it, that's the hardest part, *ja* that's the hardest part (Nomonde).

Pym and Kapp (2011, 6) note that a good number of students become dejected when they realise that their prior schooling has not adequately prepared them for university. In the case of the study participants, those who were motivated to succeed at the outset, often initially derived their motivation externally.

My first year was all about work, getting it done, and getting it done well. It was about proving myself to myself first, then proving myself to my family. I knew that my actions would be accounted for by my results (Tanashe).

The pressure on first-time university entrants is often felt acutely, as one commented,

none of my siblings have graduated even those who went to university they never completed their degrees or diplomas so it was always pressure at home to bring that change, so I was under that pressure (Inga).

Aside from this external pressure not to be a disappointment, many of the participants initially experienced themselves as 'non academic' focusing their attention on extra-curricular aspects of university life where they found a measure of belonging:

All I was really interested in was playing sport, making new mates and partying like a maniac. [My only] firsthand knowledge of [university] culture, was loads of booze, women, rugby and gym (Stanley).

For these participants, however, rather than demoralising them, stigmatisation and outsider status at some point became motivating. They described taking up an oppositional position, determined to demonstrate that the labels that were being applied to them were false.

It actually pushed me to study hard because ... um I believe if I had allowed that to emotionally entangle me ... in a way it pushed me to work hard to show maybe I'm not as stupid as you think I am, given the previous system that I come from that had its own flaws that positioned me to be where I am today but given the opportunity to get to university meant that I could do better and it means that that stigma that existed made me want to do better (Inga).

Whenever I was a bit lazy to study or when I was a bit down, just thinking of where you come from it really just encourages you to get on with it and to do what you came there to do (Luyolo).

### **Trying on new identities**

The participants described the process by which they had to come to terms with their sense of alienation from the dominant culture of the university in order to become successful students. As one participant described it, she had to 'find herself' in order to adapt to the university environment:

By finding myself I mean, like I said I came from a different environment and I'm trapped in a completely different environment than what I'm used to so in order for me to settle or try to understand or to fit I have to um how do I put this, I have to learn to be flexible, to adjust, in that way I'll be able to find myself, that there's another me who can adjust in certain environments so that's how I ended up 'finding myself' (Inga).

For Inga, 'finding herself' involved finding a version of herself that could 'fit in' in order to reduce the dissonance she experienced between the environment she was from and the environment she was 'trapped in'. 'Fitting in' took the form of concrete actions and experiences which seemed to ease the discord:

Well after I had found my way around the university it was much more easy in the sense that I had now adapted to this new system so it was easy and I found a way of learning so after first year it was much more easy (Inga).

... helping (well, hopefully lol) those that I tutor understand the sometimes complex readings given to them and also lending them a shoulder to cry on or an ear to whisper into have all played a definitive role in my life (Stanley).

I just mean that, um, I became a better version of me, I could do much more than I started there, um first year. I learned a lot, I learned a lot. And going to my third year, I became more proficient as an individual, academic and as a friend and overall development (Jean).

In several instances, finding someone who embodied both the identity of an 'academic' and identity characteristics with whom they could identify – for instance someone from the same background – created the possibility of seeing themselves as having an academic identity for the first time. Equally, having friends with similar

backgrounds and goals provided participants with resources in an environment where they experienced themselves as having the identity of a minority. While universities place a great deal of emphasis on formal support structures and facilities, for many of the participants in the present study, their informal networks were what really counted, a finding echoed in other work (see, eg, Astin 1994):

I think that when you keep the company with a similar background as yours, there will always be someone to remind you why you are there and pull you up when things get hard (Tanashe).

With the people of the same background we understood the situation and shared what we had. And this kept us going knowing that there are other people out there who are sharing the same situation as us (Lesedi).

Friends, as Soudien points out, play a major role in the formation of students' identities as they provide a comfortable space in which young people can 'try on' new identities (2009, 57). Activities, such as greater involvement with peers in study groups, tutoring and mentoring others, provided opportunities for the participants to see a different version of themselves reflected back to them as others began to define them in academic terms, asking them for assistance with academic tasks, and looking to them as people in possession of credible items of academic 'capital'. Many could clearly recall these catalytic moments in the formation of their new academic identities.

### **Catalytic moments**

Catalytic moments were turning points in the participants' lives that they reported as turning points in their development of academic identities. Lindiwe recalled a lecturer's response to a question she asked in her second year at university:

We discussed a bit and then he said 'good to see some people still think. I've gotta go but when you're in Honours we can discuss these questions much further'. Ever since then I have considered him my role model.

Several participants were compelled by their economic circumstances to seek work as tutors. To do so they had to overcome their fears and sense of inferiority. Unexpectedly for them, though, the opportunity to tutor turned into much more than a source of extra income. As tutors they were recognised as 'academic' and begin to recognise themselves as legitimate 'knowers':

Yeah, I was nervous at first as I didn't know what their reaction would be. Like for me, coming from a dusty town and then being a tutor, tutoring maybe high class students if I may say so. But *ja*, their reactions were very positive (Simphiwe).

For Peace, tutoring helped her to realise

I had a potential to do more than I expected, more than I thought I could, you know how we always look down on ourselves and to me it proved I could do more.

Tutoring also provided Peace with an insight into her own academic development as she viewed herself through the lens of her students' work:

Reading somebody else's work you getting to be aware of simple things like that you yourself used to do, so when I was reading the work of those first years ... I could even say oh, at some point I was writing like this and I'm also doing the same mistakes so in a way, in improved my academic performance ... so it was not only a reflection on their work but it was an introspection also on my work. So I think that one drove me to read more so that's when I was exposed to reading more and more and to be critical of what I'm writing.

For these participants, their involvement in mentoring and tutoring activities was experienced as 'joining the academic life' (Thabang). Others found their legitimacy in other ways. Richard's invitation to join the Golden Key Society was the moment when he realised 'more than ever that I was worthy'. In Mary's case, she was 'very much a loner' until recognition came when other students 'started seeing my marks' and began to ask to borrow her work or to join their study groups.

## CONCLUSION

Educational and social disadvantage are often named as the causes of poor academic performance, including South Africa's high failure and dropout rate at higher education institutions (HEIs). However, the study participants named disadvantage as motivating them to succeed thereby suggesting that poverty can be a resource that people draw on if they are given the chance to do so. Rather than focusing on the deficits that students bring into tertiary education with them, the study suggests that HEIs should focus on the deficits in their own institutional contexts which stigmatise and disparage other people in ways that are endured rather than voiced or publicly contested. The participants reported the enormous adaptations that they had to make in order to be accepted as legitimate in the university environment. We suggest that this points to ways in which that environment itself needs to change in order to become a more comfortable place for people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

It appears that coming to see themselves as legitimately belonging in the university environment – what we have referred to here as taking on an 'academic' identity – is central to these participants' academic success. Thus, rather than focusing all their attention on how to calculate entry points or alternative bases for entry requirements, universities would do well to be more attentive to what hinders or helps the development of academic identities among those who have historically been marginalised from the academe. Positions in tutoring, mentoring and informal forms of being valued and recognised for their academic belonging, as well as having role models whose identity characteristics match their own, are all helpful to the development of an academic identity among those who experience themselves as being outsiders at the university. The opposite is equally true: small gestures and the

failure to be recognised as legitimately present at the university can serve to confirm outsider status and make the transition to an academic identity more difficult.

Many HEIs in South Africa continue to concentrate on finding predictive factors in a student's background (school, family, socio economic factors, leadership or extra mural positions and the like) which will guide their decisions about whom to admit and whom to deny access. However, an emergent focus in the literature on student success at university suggests that students' experiences *after* entering university may be much more influential than this focus on background allows. In particular, the literature suggests that aspects of institutional culture, the approaches that are taken in the curricula, to academic-student interactions, and peer interactions, may play a significant role in the difference between success and failure. This inconveniently leads us to conclude that there will be no holy grail of easy formulae on offer to South Africa's HEIs which will tell them, on the basis of prior experience, who will or will not succeed at university. Rather, it places significant responsibility at the door of universities themselves, and of academic staff in particular, to interact with students in such a way that will nurture their emergent academic identities; counteract their perceptions of non-belonging; and foreground recognition in particular for those who are in one way or another regarded as marginal or marginalised in the academe.

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